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Social Reproduction in the Making: Recentering the Margins, Expanding the Directions

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" Social Reproduction in the Making: Recentering the Margins, Expanding the Directions "

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Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 22.2 (2020)**

Special Issue ***The Politics of Social Reproduction***. Ed. Kelly Gawel and Cinzia Arruzza

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss2/>>

Abstract: This essay aims to broaden existing historical narratives of social reproduction by revisiting Black-feminist, postcolonial feminist, and migrant diasporic writings on social reproduction from the 1970s onwards. Centering on the historical experience of women of color, migrant communities, and women in postcolonial contexts and other parts of the world, these writings develop much-needed critiques of dominant social reproduction themes developed in the capitalist contexts in Western Europe and North America. These alternative feminist methodologies and historical accounts add important correctives to what is becoming the main corpus of social reproduction theory and its historiography today. They contain political potentials that expand feminist visions of struggle on the terrain of social reproduction.

Zhivka VALIAVICHARSKA

Social Reproduction in the Making: Recentering the Margins, Expanding the Directions

In their work from the 1970s, Marxist feminists in Western Europe and the United States identified social reproduction as a field of productive, generative activity.¹ For them, patriarchal relations and the subordination of women in the home appeared as a precondition to capitalist exploitation. What stood for labor, namely wage labor and industrial production, was a product of a male political imaginary unable to account for the work of social reproduction relegated to the home, the "private," and other spheres outside the factory. The work of domestic labor, biological reproduction, and the reproduction of labor power were all ignored by "traditional" Marxist accounts, which confined their notion of labor to the factory. In other words, the critique of the "capital-labor" relationship excluded the sphere of the home and the domestic, where women were responsible for the work of reproducing labor power through domestic work, and for the reproduction of the working class more generally, by bearing and caring for children. Marxist feminists showed how these disavowed, invisible, and unrecognized forms of work were absolutely necessary for the existence of the wage-labor form and the "sphere of production" in the first place. Moreover, they showed that women's work in the home was central to the survival and reproduction of labor power and to capitalist relations more generally. They fought against the social invisibility of reproductive, affective, and care work and the ways in which these were entangled in naturalized notions of women's bodies and their affective social lives.

In short, Marxist-feminist and socialist-feminist uses of social reproduction in the 1970s became an important feminist lens that made visible the structural links between patriarchal social orders and capitalist exploitation. Further, they showed that the history of working-class struggle had effectively mirrored and reproduced patriarchal subjugation and patriarchal gender norms under capitalism. All these became points of feminist critique of the male-dominated Marxist left as well as a focus of feminist organizing against exploitation and capitalism in industrialized Western societies.

In the last several years, this tradition has been revisited by feminist scholars and activists on the left, inspiring a powerful wave of feminist analysis and organizing.² This renewed interest speaks to the strong relevance of the historical experience of the 1970s for the contemporary moment, especially with respect to struggles against the neoliberal assault on publicly funded social services and infrastructures, such as the defunding of public education, healthcare, welfare, and housing. This essay aims to broaden the historical narratives of social reproduction which have recently emerged, by revisiting Black feminist, postcolonial feminist, and immigrant women's critiques of Western and Euro-American Marxist and socialist feminism. Centering on the historical experience of women of color, migrant communities, and women in postcolonial contexts and non-Western parts of the world, these contributions develop much-needed critiques of dominant social reproduction themes. They offer alternative feminist methodologies and historical accounts of the feminist struggles in the West from the 1970s and 1980s, adding important correctives to what is becoming the main corpus of social reproduction theory and its historiography today, while also expanding our understanding of present-day struggles around social reproduction.

While writing about women's work in the domestic sphere, West-European and US Marxist and socialist feminists did not acknowledge the ongoing struggles and writings by women of color as they were organizing around issues of social reproduction. This is why Black feminists responded critically to them. The work of Claudia Jones, and later, the work of Angela Davis, Hazel Carby, Hortense Spillers, Jacqueline Jones, Dorothy Roberts, and others traced genealogies of social reproduction written from Black women's historical standpoint, from slavery to the racist politics of the welfare regimes, revealing a very different historical picture and political terrain (Jones 1949; Davis 1981, 1983, 1998 [1971];

¹ I would like to thank Kelly Gawel, Cinzia Arruzza, Macarena Gomez-Barris, K-Sue Park, Jack Vimo, and an anonymous reviewer for their productive comments, answers to specific questions, and suggestions for literature. Some arguments here were developed collaboratively with Brian Whitener and published under pseudonym in the special issue on social reproduction of *Viewpoint Magazine* 5 (2015), and republished in *Lies: A Journal of Materialist Feminism*, vol. 3 (forthcoming 2020).

² Among them, the special issues on social reproduction in *Viewpoint* 5 (2015), <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2015/11/02/issue-5-social-reproduction/> and *Radical Philosophy* vol. 2, no. 4 (2019). See also *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017); Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%* (New York and London: Verso, 2019).

Carby; Spillers; Jones 2010 [1985]; Roberts). They showed that the "home," the "family," domestic and care work, and other forms of social-reproductive labor had acquired different political meanings and social value in communities surviving slavery, racist oppression and violence, and various regimes of racial and social control.

These critiques were joined by postcolonial feminist voices. In the 1980s, the work of Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Hazel Carby, among others, showed that globally oriented left-feminist narratives from the period focusing on the structural links between patriarchal social relations and global capitalist tendencies contained unexamined colonial and Orientalizing assumptions and endorsed developmentalist narratives (Mohanty 1984, 1991, 1997, 2002; Carby). They projected cultural and social values, ideas of "emancipation," and forms of political agency specific to modern capitalist and mostly secular Western societies onto other parts of the world and used them as normative political measures according to which patriarchal oppression and women's political activities were interpreted across widely different historical and cultural contexts. These forms of Western feminism became agents of imperialism and neocolonial forms of power in the formerly colonized countries and the non-Western world. Highlighting the culturally specific values and social meanings of social-reproductive activities, the contextually specific modes of gender relations, and the different modalities of women's struggle, agency, and power, postcolonial feminists challenged Western feminists to situate their theorizing in historical and social context and to acknowledge their class, racial, and geopolitical positions.

In this essay I also discuss questions emerging at the intersection of social reproduction, immigration, and diasporic life, which to some extent move away from the literature on gender and immigration that sees migrants exclusively as a labor force. Drawing on the history of legal reforms of the welfare system from the last forty years in the United States, I explore the legal regimes that have configured immigrants both on the outside of the welfare system and as a resource of extraction that has become central to its existence. Beyond structural analyses of labor, welfare, and the law, my discussion of social reproductive labor in the context of the challenges and struggles of migrant people is driven by a set of different issues: What does the work of reproduction mean for precariously present people living in a state of prolonged or permanent suspension and under the impending possibility of expulsion? What are the meanings of "family," "home," and the labor that sustains community bonds when it is work that contends with the traumatic effects of uprooting, disruption, and loss? What does it take to sustain relationships within family, community, and lovers in legal conditions designed to restrict, sever, and punish even the most basic social and intimate bonds? How do we think of this work politically when it pushes against forces of cultural assimilation and historical erasure, of everyday hostility and xenophobia?

The reproduction of culture, community bonds, and homes for migrant, diasporic, and minoritized communities should be seen not only as a matter of cultural and social survival but as a form of political resistance. Directly or indirectly confronting the junctures of violent criminal and immigration legal regimes, of racist and colonial prejudice, of capitalist regimes of labor, property, and extraction, and of social conditions of invisibility, this work makes up the fabric of everyday resistance against capitalism, against the apparatuses of state repression and control, and against forces of assimilation and historical erasure.

Drawing out the political commonalities between these otherwise contextually and historically different experiences, this essay highlights the tremendous political importance of reproductive, emotional, and care practices that persist on the margins of the system. Because this work sustains alternative social and intimate bonds and their histories, they contain political potentials for expanding feminist histories and visions of struggles on the terrain of social reproduction.

Black Feminist Histories of Social Reproduction

In her seminal 1949 essay "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman," Claudia Jones wrote that historically Black women have been the main breadwinners and guardians of Black families and the strongholds of Black communities' struggles against slavery, racial segregation, and everyday racist violence and prejudice. "From the days of the slave traders down to the present, the Negro woman has had the responsibility of caring for the needs of the family, of militantly shielding it from the blows of Jim Crow insults, of rearing children in an atmosphere of lynch terror, segregation, and police brutality, and of fighting for the education for the children" (Jones 1949, 3). From slavery to the Jim Crow era, she points out, Black women were never confined to the "domestic" sphere alone but have always had to work outside the home under the force of violence or the force of economic necessity. After emancipation, Black women were most often the main breadwinners for their families and children, occupying the lowest paying jobs in industry, agriculture, the domestic sphere, and in various service professions. As workers and mothers, she argues, they faced a triple oppression made by the converging

forces of economic exploitation, racism, and the social demands of reproductive labor—while serving as pillars of material and emotional support for their communities.

Writing in the 1970s and the early 1980s from the opposite sides of the Atlantic, Black feminists in the United States and Britain continued this line of thought. "Throughout the country's history," Angela Davis wrote in response to *Wages for Housework*, Black women always toiled alongside their men under the whip of plantation overseers, suffering "a grueling sexual equality at work" (Davis 1981, 230). It was "the sheer force of things [that] rendered her equal to her man" (ibid., 116). Speaking out from the experience of Black women's lives and journeys from the Caribbean to Britain, Beverly Bryan, Stella Dadzie, and Suzanne Scafe similarly describe: "In the eyes of the 'backra' (the overseer) we were equal to the men just as long as our strength matched theirs. But in our own eyes, we were more than equal to the men, for having completed our work on the estate, it fell on us to tend to the children and perform domestic duties" (Bryan, Dadzie, and Scafe, 17). After slavery Black women were employed in vast numbers, predominantly in agricultural work for the tobacco, sugar, and cotton industries, and as domestic and housekeeping servants for the white elites—many of their occupations continuing the legacy of slavery. In other words, the domestic confines of the housewife was the problem of white working- and middle-class women, and Black women's labor, as well as the labor of immigrant women, was mobilized in the reproductive realm as well as in the agriculture and service industries long before discourses of the "double burden" emerged in white feminist thought in the Northwest. Moreover, the money they earned "was often the sole source of income for the entire extended family" (ibid., 20). As a result, Davis observes, "male supremacist structures could not become deeply embedded in the internal workings of the slave system" (Davis 1998 [1971], 116). As wives and mothers, workers and breadwinners, notions of Black womanhood often revolved around strength, resilience, and independence rather than femininity, fragility, and subordination, the white middle-class norms of womanhood.

Further, for African-American communities the "domestic" was historically a site of autonomy and resistance due to the specific ways in which American slavery shaped the structure of gender relations both within Black communities and in relationship to white slaveholders. Davis articulates lucidly these points with respect to the role of domestic life in the social lives of enslaved African-descendent communities. While for working- and middle-class white American women the domestic was a site of confinement, dependence, and invisibility, for Black women during slavery, the "home" was, on the contrary, the only place where the enslaved could breathe away from the eyes of their overseers. Their habitats were not only the sites where they could define their lives on their own, but also the places where political work took place—where resistance was organized, rebellions planned, and fugitives harbored. It was also the place where domestic work for Black women acquired social meaning and social value because it was not directly extracted and expropriated out of them to benefit the masters. Paradoxically, Davis observes, domestic labor, that material and social expression of women's inferior status, was in fact "the only meaningful labor for the slave community as a whole" (ibid.). This is because domestic work was the only kind of labor that was not directly appropriated by the slave owner and could not be claimed by the oppressor, and it went into building and sustaining Black communities. In Davis's words, "precisely [by] performing the drudgery which has long been a central expression of the socially conditioned inferiority of women, the Black woman in chains could help to lay the foundation for some degree of autonomy, both for herself and for her men" (ibid.).

Further, women's authority in the home made them the backbone of resistance movements against slavery, oppression, and racism. "By virtue of the brutal force of circumstances," Davis writes, "the Black woman was assigned the mission of promoting the consciousness and practice of resistance" (ibid., 113). The labor performed in the domestic sphere made it possible for Black women to assume a central role and agency in building resistance to slavery. Thus, even as they were suffering a unique form of exploitation, Black women under slavery were pushed into the center of the social and political lives of their communities because of the different structural conditions and the organization of labor under slavery.

At the same time, Black women's bodies and their reproductive labor became central to the successful functioning of the slave system as a whole, and of racial and class domination during and after slavery. The work of Angela Davis, Toni Cade Bambara, Jacqueline Jones, and Dorothy Roberts from the late 1970s to the 1990s, and more recent feminist scholarship on the question of reproduction and slavery, such as the work of Jennifer Morgan, Pamela Bridgewater, and Walter Johnson, has demonstrated the centrality of enslaved women's physical and reproductive labor to the material and ideological formation of the New World slave system, the discourses and practices around "breeding," and generally the ways in which the racial domination of white people depended on the biological reproduction of the enslaved

(Davis 1983, 1998 [1971]; Bambara; Jones 2010 [1985]; Roberts; Morgan; Schwartz; Bridgewater; Smithers; Johnson).

In her famous 1987 essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," Hortense Spillers complicates notions of African-American "family" life under slavery even further. Under slavery, she observes, the family structure of Black African-descendent people often did not exist, or had to be maintained against coerced separation and violence. In fact, American slavery tended towards a "rigidified disorganization" of family life, Spillers notes, and it prohibited all forms of social life within which Black people could form stable and lasting bonds (Spillers). Mothers and fathers were separated, children were taken forcibly away from their mothers at a very young age, men and women were forcibly coupled together to reproduce the slave labor force, and often Black people who lived together and cared for each other had no family or blood relationship whatsoever. Studies in North-American slavery and the Atlantic slave trade, such as the now classic work of Orlando Patterson, have shown that these were part of a deliberate technique of causing social disorganization as part of submitting Black African-descendent people into slavery and shaping the subjectivity of the enslaved. They meant to violently uproot a newly acquired slave from their prior social environment and introduce them into the racist hierarchies of slave society as a marginal or liminal being, a quasi-person or a non-person (Patterson). As Davis points out, the family was in fact outlawed as a functional entity and permitted to exist only when it benefitted the slave owner, that is, under conditions that such unions created new slaves (Davis 1998 [1971]). These practices scrambled orders of consanguinity, what Spillers calls the "intricate calculus of descent," forcing Black people into "patterns of dispersal" and loss of social coordinates and history (Spillers, 72-73). These analyses show that family and kinship relations in Black communities were antithetical to the logic of slave property and exchange, and their perpetual disorganization and destruction was a direct technology of racial subjugation and the continued reproduction of the slave ownership system. Importantly, Davis writes, if strong personal bonds between immediate family members existed, they "bore witness to the remarkable capacity of Black people for resisting the disorder so violently imposed on their lives" (Davis 1998 [1971], 113).

The genealogies of social reproduction written from Black women's historical standpoint caution against universal notions of womanhood and generalizing, unsituated critiques of gender relations and patriarchal oppression—the unexamined moves that informed the most influential Marxist-feminist and socialist-feminist interventions from the 1970s. They show that, from slavery to the racist politics of the welfare regimes, the "home," domestic labor, and care work acquire different political meanings and value for communities surviving conditions of racist oppression, violence, and historical erasure.

Migrant and Diasporic Lives, Postcolonial Critiques

Marxist-feminist and socialist-feminist interventions had a mixed reception among immigrant women for similar reasons. In one respect, critiques of domestic work resonated with immigrant women, who had been shuttled in massive numbers to perform domestic and care work for the white middle classes in the metropolises. As the geographies of the new global division of labor developed, feminists turned to examine the commodification of domestic and care work and to challenge the social hierarchies and meanings of "work." Focusing on the global reconfiguration of the labor force, they showed how the commodification of domestic, care, affective, and service work devalued the social meaning of these activities and inscribed them in hierarchical value-regimes of labor. In the process they mobilized racial, gender, and ethnic differences, as well as immigration status, to subordinate, dehumanize, and devalue black, brown, and immigrant bodies and lives (Ehrenreich; Ehrenreich and Hochschild; Chang; Anderson; Parreñas).³

However, accounts heavily focused on links between immigration and the commodification of domestic work, or immigration and labor generally, omit crucial aspects of the experiences of migration. They fail to capture the traumatic effects of disruption, displacement, and loss that often accompany migration and organize the collective and personal experience of migrant people. The sense of fragmentation, disorientation, and alienation that follows the severing of community and family or social bonds, the loss of home, history, and the social coordinates that anchor one's sense of self and sense of belonging—all these, when taken into account, open a different understanding of what is involved in the labor of migrant people, and specifically in the affective, care, and emotional work that migrant women perform in diasporic and exilic contexts.

What does it mean to build, rebuild, and sustain communities, lives, and social and cultural habitats in conditions of displacement and uprooting? What kind of labor is involved in the making, remaking,

³ This is only a sample of the voluminous literature with a focus on domestic and service work.

and holding together a "home," when "homes" are the everyday sites of traumatic reenactments of loss and disruption, of recuperation and transformation? What kind of work does it take to survive and persist against forces that make you unwanted and unwelcome, to build and sustain a life, home, and community, and to care for the lives of others against everyday xenophobia, ethnophobia, and racism, and in social conditions of prejudice, abandon, and neglect? What does it mean to reproduce a minority language and history against forces of cultural assimilation and historical erasure, or in legal and cultural conditions that discourage and prohibit culturally specific practices that keep together community and everyday life?

Selma James' writings on immigrant women's labor contain important, although brief, insights that could open up our analysis in these directions. The labor of immigrant women, James writes, contains the hidden cost of rebuilding their lives and the lives of loved ones from the ground up in material, cultural, and historical contexts that do not belong to them, after the uprooting of everything they've known (James 2012 [1985], 174-189). It is also about the tremendous strength migrant people develop while fighting to stay where they are often unwelcome, about the persistence and resilience of building anew and keeping together a life and a home in dreadful uncertainty, in a state of prolonged temporariness and suspension, under the impending expiration of a legal status, or under the threat of deportation. For women coming from colonized countries, James notes, immigration was about "reappropriating their own wealth, stolen from them at home and accumulated in the industrial metropolis" (ibid, 175; see also Mirza). It was the wealth stolen from their own and their ancestors' labor, and it was rightfully theirs to claim. When Black people started immigrating into Britain a century after the abolition of slave trade, Bryan, Dadzie, and Scafe write, "we came to a country we had already helped to build. Our labor provided the foundations upon which many financial institutions, seaports and industrial centers were built" (Bryan, Dadzie, Scafe, 7).

Further, the work involved in the reproduction of a minority language, culture, home, community, and history is work that immigrant people engage in as part of their everyday lives, and against multiple forces of erasure. This work is most often carried out in feminized ways against cultural prejudice and stigma, in contexts that render them patriarchal, "backward," or "traditional."

"It is impossible to speak of the relation of women to capital anywhere without at the same time confronting the question of development versus underdevelopment," James wrote while involved in the emerging international women's movement, which linked women's struggles and organizing around the globe as the non-Aligned movement was at its peak (James 2012 [1975], 104). Her work and organizing brought together women's struggles at the intersections of immigration, race, and Third-World movements for global alternatives (James 2012 [1986], 190-204). However, James' work also entertained and often endorsed emerging discourses around "development," which found their way in the international feminist movements. The International Wages for Housework campaign, for example, an organization James was involved in, connected women from a dizzying range of cultural, material, and economic contexts, from Peru and Trinidad, to India, Uganda, the Philippines, and Mexico, to share experience of their social conditions and political work, forging a sense of solidarity and togetherness.⁴

This sweeping internationalism came at a great cost: by conjuring an "international sisterhood," James consistently universalized women's oppression, insisting that across cultural and material contexts, "what does not vary is that whatever the standard, women are the poorer and the socially weaker sex" (James 2012 [1985], 173). These forms of organizing and writing saw a strong push-back from postcolonial feminists, as well as from women-organizers from socialist countries. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's signature intervention from the early 1980s unpacked their Eurocentric, colonial, and developmentalist premises. Mohanty argued that Western Marxist and socialist feminists contributed—together with the rest of Western feminism—to the production of the "Third World" as a monolithic construct across widely different cultural and socio-historical contexts and posited an imagined, singular notion of Third-World womanhood, reinscribing colonial hegemony. In Western feminism patriarchy became a universal structure that oppressed all women in the same way—a "stable ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these countries" (Mohanty 1984). Presuming in this way that the conditions of oppression were the same, these feminisms erased historical and cultural

⁴ For discussion, see Nina Lopez, "A Winning Perspective," in *Sex, Race, and Class*, 8-9. This developmental internationalism rose to dominance in the second half of the 1970s in a number of international conferences on women in Mexico City (1975); Wellesley (1976); Copenhagen (1980), and more, and was embraced by the United Nations in various projects on women and development in the Third World. For a critical response, see Nawal Saadawi, Fetië Mernissi, and Mallica Vajarathon, "A Critical Look at the Wellesley Conference," *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly* 4:2 (Winter 1978), 101-7.

contexts, constituting women as a homogenous group on the basis of their shared oppression. Mixed up with racist and colonial prejudice, Western feminisms posited a subject powerless, dependent, and uneducated, a product of the "backward" socio-economic conditions of which she was part. In this sense, "reproduction" and "unpaid labor" also became universalizing frameworks as they erased the kinds of culturally specific values and social meanings these activities assumed in non-Western and non-capitalist contexts (Edholm, Harris, and Young; Rosaldo; Parmar and Amos; Bhanvani and Coulson).⁵

And infamously, by projecting norms of agency and emancipation specific to Western liberal capitalist societies onto societies and cultures in other parts of the world, they judged "traditional" gender and sexual practices as "uncivilized," backward, oppressive, and patriarchal. Carby points out that paradoxically, Western Marxist feminists, even though they were critical of capitalism, assumed capitalist relations as the gateway to emancipation and progress (Carby). Through categories such as "unpaid labor," "wage," and monetary measures of poverty, they implicitly embraced capitalist development as the vehicle for reforms. Mai Taha and Sarah Salem further demonstrate the ways in which these tropes have continued a Western colonial and imperial legacy in the context of postcolonial Egypt, where notions of "modern motherhood" and the "modern household" became essential to the construction of a new vision of postcolonial nationhood and "the collective dream of independence" (Taha and Salem).

The social histories of migrant women who come to the affluent countries in the North-West are similarly subsumed and erased by these colonial and Eurocentric logics, which posited Western capitalist societies as the evolutionary vanguard of social change in the sphere of gender relations around the world. Contrary to Western liberal, and even Left narratives of migration, many immigrant women continue to experience immigration to the "developed" capitalist countries not as a kind of emancipation from patriarchal oppression and traditional social values, but rather as a social demotion and gender subordination through a ruthless assimilation into the host country's dominant culture and its social norms, and into its legal, labor, and racial regimes. Migration, Carby observed, is profoundly disruptive of gender structures, including the "female organizations that were based upon kinship systems that allowed more power and autonomy to women than those of the colonizing nation" (Carby, 121). For many women from other parts of the world, moving to the "developed" capitalist countries often means giving up their professions, education, experience, and the autonomy and social authority they occupied in their own societies, to be brutally subsumed by Western capitalist and secular regimes of patriarchy and gender norms, of racism and racialization, of xenophobic othering. The education, experience, and skills accumulated in their "prior lives" lose all their value and become meaningless in the rigid, xenophobic systems which render their knowledges, practices, and languages obscure and illegible, and their past ceases to exist. Many migrants, drawn by the myth of a better life and social opportunity in the more affluent countries, have to quickly settle into disappointment and come to terms with the social degradation that these societies accord them.

Instead of positing "women" as a coherent group, preexisting and already constituted, postcolonial feminists have insisted that feminist analyses should examine how "women" and "men" emerge as subjects through cultural practices in each particular context, and examine the culturally specific logics of gender practices and gender subordination as they configure the political and social meanings of "women," "men," and their social activities (Mohanty, 334). Uncovering these logics would register not only the historically and culturally specific modes of gender subordination embedded in contexts of social difference and socio-economic conditions, but would also render visible women's agency, power, and existing cultures of resistance—rather than just their victimhood. Arguing for situated knowledges, for contextually and culturally specific analyses of gender relations, and for attentiveness to the cultural meanings of gendered social practices, they challenged Western Marxist and socialist feminists to situate their theorizing—to develop an awareness that their concepts and critical methodologies are products of their own socio-cultural contexts and geographies.

Intimate, Cultural, and Social Bonds against State and Capitalist Enclosures

Immigrants and cultural minorities often have to sustain and reproduce their communities in conditions that directly criminalize their culturally specific practices and make their lives more unbearable in an

⁵ The literature referenced here presents some early interventions. See also the contributions in the two special issues of *Feminist Review*, "Many Voices, One Chant: Black Feminist Perspectives," no. 17, Autumn 1984; "Socialist Feminism: Out of the Blue," no. 23, Summer 1986. For discussion on the history of the debates, see Heidi Seifa Mirza; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and M. Jacqui Alexander, among others (Mirza 1997; Russo and Torres; Alexander and Mohanty; Mohanty 2002).

effort to drive them out. States and governments have a long history of using laws to target culturally specific means of survival of particular ethnic, racial, and cultural minorities to disempower them economically and socially, and to create a hostile and unwelcoming environment. As legal scholar K-Sue Park describes, in the 1870s the city of San Francisco passed ordinances that targeted the cultural practices and forms of survival of Chinese communities, banning the use of ceremonial gongs and shoulder poles for carrying loads, restricting the operation of laundromats in wooden buildings, and others (Park, 1913-14).

These and numerous other examples in U.S. history show the ways in which legal and disciplinary state regimes have been used to structure prohibitive and destructive environments for the reproduction of community life and the social worlds specific to cultural, racialized, and immigrant minorities. Because the work of social reproduction is always culturally specific and localized, in immigrant and diasporic contexts it often has to be performed in conditions of state repression and criminalization, or in the prohibitive contexts of dominant cultural and social norms, or both. US criminal and regulatory regimes are designed to restrict, sever, and even punish forms of family, kinship, and community, as well as forms of survival and social and communal life, which do not conform to Western liberal family models and the social norms that reproduce capitalist relations. Immigrant communities regularly find themselves up against legally enforced enclosures that make it impossible for them to engage in habitual culturally-specific practices that mobilize common resources and public space for communal life, to share skills and resources, and to organize communal childcare and eldercare in their own ways.

This is particularly relevant for forms of "family" and parenthood, as well as childcare and eldercare that involve larger kinship, community, friendship, and neighborhood circles not conforming to nuclear family models in Western capitalist societies. The struggles of LGBTQ communities have revealed how legally recognized family relations—which take the heterosexual, gender-binary nuclear family as their model—actively prohibit the proliferation and reproduction of alternative intimate bonds, family, parenthood, care, and community (Raha). Similarly, cultural minorities whose families and social worlds do not align with Western nuclear family models perpetually confront and survive the destructive effects of these systems on their communities and forms of social life.

US regimes of legal immigration programs have notoriously become institutions of violent, often deadly, separation because they assume an autonomous, self-sufficient, able-bodied individual and recognize only a very limited number of family relations as legitimate or subject to immigration "privileges." Stratified and individualized to the extreme, the system has drawn insurmountable divisions between the most basic and intimate bonds and social ties. Family-based legal immigration programs thus continue to wreak havoc through immigrant communities whose families, kinship networks, affective ties, forms of parenthood, and practices of care for others radically depart from North-American capitalist models. This includes the primary affective bonds of those who were raised by several "mothers" and "fathers," as it often happens in non-Western cultural contexts, each of these caretakers having a primary parental role for a period of time, or at certain ages, or for certain parts of daily life. Or those who were raised by their grandparents, often their grandmothers and great-aunts—these are culturally specific practices of care often reinforced by global migration patterns that have pushed the parents to the more affluent countries for work.

The intersection of immigration and welfare presents another set of disturbing realities. Work in critical urban studies in the United States has shown how welfare and social infrastructures have been deployed strategically as a means of social control of racial minorities and the poor. These forms of discipline, social control, and social marginalization operate exclusively on the terrain of social reproduction. Whitener's analysis (in this issue) shows that these trends have become particularly egregious in the post-industrial urban areas of the Midwest, as in the water shutoffs in Detroit, and the closures of public schools and mental health clinics in Chicago.⁶ Predominantly in African-American parts of these cities, infrastructures of access to social-reproductive services have been turned into coercive instruments of dispossession and racialization while deepening class and racial inequalities and their urban divides. Further, Whitener reveals that these social infrastructures have been strategically deployed for decades in ways that appropriate and reroute resources from working-class and predominantly African-American populations to the advantage of wealthier neighborhoods with predominantly white inhabitants. These practices have accomplished the double effect of both producing

⁶ See Brian Whitener's article in the current issue, as well as an earlier version of this argument, "Race, Class, and Social Reproduction in the Urban Present: The Case of the Detroit Water and Sewage System," *Viewpoint Magazine* 5 (2015).

marginalization and punishing the marginalized, of both producing poverty and punishing the poor (Gilmore, Wacquant).⁷

In similar ways, public welfare institutions in the United States have turned migrant people into a major source of extraction, while excluding them from access to public resources. Through a series of anti-immigrant legislation over several decades, these administrations have been transformed into a machinery of making economically vulnerable migrant people deportable, and into an extension of ICE campaigns of tracking and deporting immigrants. Park shows that such measures have a long history, combining state, federal, and a range of other actors such as private entities and local municipal laws (Park). Rendering vast populations deportable way beyond the capacities of the government to remove them, these legal regimes create conditions of vulnerability and precarity, instill fear and terror, and force people into extreme circumstances. The end-goal of these policies, Park observes, is that of "self-deportation" or "self-removal"—a long-term tactic of immigration governance that makes the lives of undesirable migrant populations intolerable by "targeting every aspect of their lives," from restrictions on access to basic means of subsistence, employment, mobility, healthcare, education, professional training and licenses, and others (ibid., 1884). Park traces these strategies back to settler colonial governance. Settler colonial states pursued an "indirect removal policy... that had the effect of attacking native people's lives from every angle, impacting their health, safety, and freedom of mobility, and their ability to find food, shelter, and maintain kinship bonds and political orders." These were indirect methods of expelling and dispossessing indigenous communities while "[offering] the advantages of cost efficiency and preserving settlers' diplomatic positions vis-à-vis tribes" (ibid., 1889). In the years leading up to and after Emancipation similar strategies were used by the governments of Southern states to drive Black populations out, while others states passed laws to prohibit the settlement of Black people on their territories (ibid., 1907).

Yet as Park observes, beyond forcing undesirable migrants out of the country through the legal system or through extra-legal means, these policies have another important effect—of keeping vast numbers of people in subordination and in service of an exploitative labor regime (ibid., 1913). By expanding the grounds for deportability way beyond the possibility of actual enforcement, it has created a large pool of potentially deportable people that live terrorized by the daily threat of losing their livelihoods, homes, communities, and the lives they've built, terrified of the thought of having to leave without having anywhere else to go. These are conditions for unlimited abuse and exploitation.

Welfare institutions on the federal, state, and local levels have been mobilized in these directions since their formation, and while this history cannot be traced in detail here, this logic is particularly visible with the passing of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996. Engineered by the Clinton administration, they are remembered among immigrant communities and immigration activists for the harmful effects on the lives of many people. The effects of these reforms continue today as they laid the grounds for the massive deportation campaigns that were set in motion under the Obama and Trump administrations. IIRIRA made non-citizens living within the country (including permanent residents) with very minor criminal records deportable, regardless of whether they are legally present in the country or not. The law applied retroactively to people with records prior to 1996, and many immigrants with minor criminal convictions who had served their sentences years and sometimes decades earlier, suddenly became deportable, leaving it to the discretion of each government to enforce the law selectively, targeting select categories of people according to its changing orders of priorities. Subsequent administrations did not need to do much more than exercise their executive power to mobilize these already existing legislations in order to orchestrate some of the most massive, egregious, and cruel expulsions of precariously present migrant people in global history. Park captures the logic of such policies with precise language: "This production of an excess of options to legally remove people widen[s] the berth of executive discretion both to determine its deportation priorities and to calibrate self-deportation policy by leveraging the threats inherent in federal deportation law" (Park, 1920).

In conjunction with IIRIRA, the Clinton administration also passed PRWORA, the above-mentioned welfare reform. The PRWORA is known for turning welfare institutions into an extension of the criminal justice system by cutting off people with drug-related and other felony convictions from federal public assistance and professional license programs for life. Thus, they prolong punishment beyond the criminal system and narrow the existential chances of already marginalized populations. Scholar and critic Michelle Alexander has written and spoken about the ways these policies have deliberately targeted African-American youth, continuing the legacy of racial segregation, reproducing structural racism, and

⁷ For a more extensive review of the literature, see Brian Whitener's article in the current issue.

deepening racialized class inequalities (Alexander). At the same time, in conjunction with the IIRIRA, the welfare reform of 1996 also excluded precariously present migrants from the vast majority of federal, state, and local public assistance programs. While some of these exclusions were already in place, the 1996 law made it a deportable offense to use publicly funded social support programs, including public or assisted housing, healthcare, disability, unemployment, retirement, food assistance, and school tuition and other school-related programs. Even when, regardless of their legal status, the vast majority of migrant people working in the United States continue to pay taxes and contribute to these publicly funded social services just like citizens do, it became a deportable offense to reach for them in times of need.⁸ The law made exceptions only in situations of medical emergency (but not including organ transplantation); communicable diseases of public health concern; birth; short-term, in-kind disaster relief; and short-term, in-kind life and safety services at the community level.⁹ But even then, for example, when the Flint water crisis hit the city, social services were seen to require IDs as a way of "screening" for immigrant people because the water was provided by the state of Michigan. Among other changes, the PRWORA and IIRIRA reforms also made welfare and public housing institutions require proof of immigration status and report on undocumented migrants; made possible the fusing immigration and criminal law enforcement, and more.

PRWORA and IIRIRA targeted mostly persons with temporary legal statuses such as temporary workers, along with undocumented people, but they also made permanent residents ineligible for public assistance for the first five years of residence, exempting only very limited classes of immigrants such as refugees and asylees.¹⁰ After the law went into effect in January 1997, many migrants and their children found themselves immanently threatened with homelessness, perpetually threatened with deportation, and with very limited access to medical care. In other words, with respect to migrant populations, these legal and administrative systems have become powerful mechanisms extraction, subordination, and expulsion, inverted by the classic xenophobic discourse that immigrants are a burden leeching on public resources, a discourse that completely discounts their material, social, and cultural contributions.

The likelihood of "public charge" remains one of the main criteria for legal immigration, and it places the burden on applicants for entry or legal status to show that they are unlikely to turn to public resources or become "public charge." Even though the Trump administration has heavily mobilized the "public charge" doctrine to expand its executive authority to limit immigration and deport more people, laws that bar immigrants from welfare programs have long been in place. "Self-sufficiency has been a basic principle of United States immigration law since this country's earliest immigration statutes," opens the section of PRWORA, and "it continues to be the immigration policy of the United States that— a) aliens within the nation's borders not depend on public resources to meet their needs, but rather rely on their own capabilities and the resources of their families, their sponsors, and private organizations, and b) the availability of public benefits not constitute an incentive for immigration to the United States."¹¹ In its controversial rule from August 14, 2019, the Trump administration has drawn heavily on PRWORA and IIRIRA, the 1996 legal reform, to further limit the grounds of inadmissibility for people applying for entry, extension of legal presence, change of legal status, and permanent residence. It did so by expanding the meaning of public charge and by narrowing the already very limited types of public benefits (and their monetary equivalents) that people could use without harming their immigration status, which means without harming their lives, the lives of others around them, and their futures in the country.¹² As the rule went into effect in February 2020, scholars and activists are discussing the

⁸ Leah Zallman, et al. "Immigrants Contributed an Estimated \$115.2 Billion More to the Medicare Trust Fund than They Took Out in 2002–09." *Health Affairs* (Millwood) 32, 6 (2013): 1153–60; Leah Zallman, et al. "Unauthorized Immigrants Prolong the Life of Medicare's Trust Fund," *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 30, 7 (2015): 867–1042.

⁹ Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, P.L. 104-193, 110 Stat. 2168, 104th Congress, 22 August 1996, Title IV, Section 401.

¹⁰ Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, P.L. 104-193, 110 Stat. 2168, 104th Congress, 22 August 1996, Title IV, Sections 400–441.

¹¹ Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, P.L. 104-193, 110 Stat. 2168, 104th Congress, 22 August 1996, Title IV, Section 400.

¹² Department of Homeland Security, "Inadmissibility on Public Charge Grounds," *Federal Register* 84, 157 (August 14, 2019): 41292–41508.

unprecedented sweep of these changes and their disproportionate impact on ethnic, racial, and cultural minorities.

The concept of "public charge" has a long history in US immigration policies. The work of Gerald Neuman, among others, traces this history to the adoption of the English poor laws, which provided the foundation for the legal regulation regimes of immigrants emerging after American Independence. States accepting immigrants enacted various poor laws as measures to prevent the entry of persons who would become public charge, including the elderly and people with mental and physical disabilities (Neuman, 1847-48). This was all, as Neuman explains, in the fear "that European states were sending their lazy and intemperate subjects, as well as the mentally and physically disabled, to burden America" (ibid., 1850).¹³ Historian Hidetaka Hirota explores this history further and points to the centrality of Massachusetts and New York state laws and their enforcement in the consolidation of the federal immigration system with the first federal Immigration Act of 1882, which included clauses against any "convict," "lunatic," "idiot," and "any person unable to take care of himself or herself without becoming public charge"—a status which could be assigned to a large swath of people, including the elderly, pregnant women, and people with physical and mental disabilities (Hirota).¹⁴ The first federal regulations drew heavily on the measures of these two states, which were the main receiving states in the influx of poor Irish migrants affected by famine and industrialization in the 1800s. Having broad discretionary power, state officials used "the widest possible definitions" and "arbitrary interpretations" of the categories available to them to exclude masses of arrivants and deport struggling recent immigrants (Hirota, 3-6). At the height of ethnic prejudice against the Irish and hostile sentiments against the poor, they "operated with little constraint as they put in place harsh deportation measures against those foreigners whom they deemed undesirable" (ibid., 6). Cybelle Fox explores the deepening of the stereotype of the dependent and "degenerate" immigrants coming from Eastern and Southern Europe in the 1920s, which became embedded in the emergent architecture of the modern welfare system (Fox, 95-100). Migrants from Eastern and Southeastern Europe were banned from immigrating to the United States between 1924 and 1956 as part of the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, a West-European and white supremacist project, which rendered the people of the East and the Southeast as economically impoverished and inferior ethnic others. Initiated at the height of the Red Scare, it was also mixed up with anticommunist fear of revolution and was supported by the most racist organizations.

These genealogies demonstrate that, in Hirota's words, "American immigration regulation emerged as a matter of class" (ibid. 7), and rested on racist and ethnophobic orders of supremacy. The economic principles of self-sufficiency and self-reliance are also the ideological grounds for political orders hostile to social equality and collective social responsibility. Much has been written on the historical roots and conceptual foundations of neoliberalism and its doctrines of individual responsibility, self-sufficiency, and self-reliance—from radical economic liberals in the 1940s who proposed it as a kind of anti-left utopian vision of social justice, to the Reagan and Thatcher visions in the 1980s who espoused radical individualism as a basic principle of economic and social governance. But looking at the intersection of immigration and social welfare in the US context shows that these doctrines—of self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and personal responsibility—have been developed and implemented in practice with respect to migrant populations long before the Reagan and Thatcher governments embraced and generalized them as a social and economic principle. The ableist, classist, ageist, racist, ethnophobic, and other discriminatory operations of these policies reveal the xenophobic fears that continue to organize the biopolitical logics of the state and the immigration system's deep entanglements with colonial history.

Conclusion

That we have turned back to the 1970s at this particular political moment is not a coincidence: such a turn has been prompted by the exigencies of our struggles. Hard-fought gains of waged and unwaged women's struggles in the 1970s are being currently undone, forcing us to return, once again and rather urgently, to the question of social reproduction. In fact, in the neoliberal context, existing infrastructures of social reproduction—the legacies of welfare state capitalism and socialism are being radically dismantled. But more than that, they have become instruments of dispossession of the means of survival

¹³ Benjamin Klebaner shows that this generalized fear disproportionately reflected the practice of European states to "dump" unwanted populations onto their colonies. Klebaner, "The Myth of Foreign Pauper Dumping in the United States," *Social Service Review* 35, 3 (1961), 302-09.

¹⁴ 1882 Immigration Act, Sess. I, Chap. 376; 22 Stat. 214; 47th Congress; August 3, 1882, Section 2.

of already marginalized communities, often through state-administrative means. Mostly falling on communities of color, immigrants, and the poor, these measures reproduce the structural conditions of their class. Their aim is to demand compliance and obedience to the work and debt regime, and to ensure that material wealth and social power remain structurally unavailable to them.

Today, unlike the 1970s, struggles on the terrain of social reproduction, historically tethered to the state, are facing challenges to reimagine themselves against or outside of its horizons. These challenges have made us turn urgently to the question of autonomy, of developing collective skills and resources necessary for our everyday survival. They lead us to the forging of new autonomous forms of collective care, networks of mutual aid, survival, and wellbeing, and invite communities to take back the resources and knowledges necessary to care for each other and to continue to survive on a daily basis. Writing from the experiences of the California student movements against the neoliberal reforms of public education, Amanda Armstrong has called these "insurgent forms of social reproduction" (Armstrong).

The capitalist system and the state have amassed political instruments to prevent the proliferation of communities and social life alternative to the ones organized by the wage labor form, by market relations and the private property regime. The repression of alternative forms of life and reproduction occurs, whether these are practiced as forms of survival by those on the margins of the system and by communities of minoritized cultures, or whether they are part of political visions of imagining social relations differently. As Armstrong argues, "by sustaining regimes of ownership, by enforcing fees for basic necessities, and by breaking up squats and communal encampments, police forces, the courts, and other state bureaucracies enclose the material conditions of life, making it virtually impossible to reproduce ourselves and each other free of waged work." The state thereby closes off, through repression, "what we could hold in common" (ibid.). The state has criminalized a vast range of social, material, and economic forms of life involved in reshaping social and material relations beyond capitalism and the state, and has legally foreclosed basic forms of survival, ways of helping and caring for each other—to make sure that capitalist relations remain dominant. Migrant and minoritized communities experience these enclosures dramatically and violently, especially when these enclosures target the everyday practices and social bonds people bring with themselves from other parts of the world that push against capitalist relations or private property, or against Western social values that conform to them.

In the process of building autonomy on the terrain of social reproduction, these struggles can humbly learn from the experience and the collective survival of those permanently barred from the reproductive infrastructures of the state through various legal exclusions. As this essay has discussed, undocumented and precariously documented migrants, as well as ex-felons, have been permanently excluded from access to housing, unemployment, food stamps, healthcare, and other social resources available to citizens. Transgender and gender non-conforming people, often trapped in the administrative and legal limbos of the state and in the binary regimes of public services and the health care system, have developed means of navigating within and against these institutions' violence and control. Their particular conditions have given rise to body autonomy and gender-hack movements dedicated to reclaiming our bodies from the administrative and regulatory regimes of the medical system and the state. The histories of slavery, legal segregation, and racism, along with the feminist genealogies of Black resistance drawn here, reveal that social reproductive activity opened terrains for both intense forms of subjugation and crucial forms of resistance.

In this sense, learning from the histories and cultures of social reproduction and survival of communities of color, of immigrant communities, of queer and trans communities, of culturally marginalized groups, and others who have been historically excluded from or have had little recourse to state resources, is of greatest importance to our struggles. These communities and cultures have accumulated skills, knowledge, and the resilience and strength to survive in spaces of exclusion and invisibility. As the political links and possibilities for solidarity between these positions are becoming clearer, critiques of the state and struggles for autonomy can hardly go very far without their experiences and insights.

This is to say that we should begin to recognize the work of sustaining bonds of communities in survival and resistance as political work of the most meaningful kind. We should also recognize the enormous resilience, strength, and emotional energy it takes to persist in struggle and survival against forces of assimilation and historical erasure, against legal systems and social norms that prohibit, repress, and violently destroy them. It is work of the most arduous kind as it takes tremendous emotional resilience and strength. Navigating complex tensions that emerge at the clashing points of violent institutional, cultural, and legal norms that reproduce capitalist relations, this work enables alternative forms of community and social life. It transforms rupture and fragmentation into new

historical and social figurations, into new worldly realignments—while expanding our geographies and social alternatives.

This kind of organizing also requires a serious commitment to postcolonial critiques of Eurocentrism and "First-World" frameworks. This is not only because diasporic people who come from different contexts are subsumed by their regimes of gender, class, and race—a process which erases their social difference and the histories of oppression and resistance present in the multiple worlds they carry and negotiate. It is also because there is a great deal to learn from indigenous and non-Western cultures of social and communal life. Thinking and practicing materialist feminism in these directions opens a wider range of avenues for movements in the present, and for building struggles on the terrain of social reproduction.

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